

GIVEN Forum

Washington DC

**Keynote Address: Theology of Woman**

Sr. Mary Prudence Allen, RSM, PhD

June 11, 2016 8:45-9:20 am

**Text**

**Introduction**

Recently Pope Francis encouraged Catholic scholars to write about a theology of woman.<sup>1</sup> This present conference, gathering together three-hundred Catholic women leaders between the ages of 20 to 30, is a wonderful context within which to ponder a response to the Holy Father's invitation. As a philosopher, I have studied the long history of the concept of woman in relation to man drawing upon the evidence of reason and observation of the senses. Theology draws upon different evidence, namely, faith guarded by the tradition of the Church and Scripture. Both philosophy and theology involve disputation or rational argumentation; they seek in complementary ways to assimilate by rational understanding the truth of "the prior gift that has been given to us by God in the Church."<sup>2</sup>

The theme of theology of women in relation to this conference of young professional women invites us to ponder a particular aspect of Sacred Scripture and the tradition of the Church, namely how selected women in Scripture responded to an encounter with God in which they experienced a call to participate in a Divine action plan. We can we learn from the failures and successes of women whose lives have become part of the gift of the Church to us through the

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<sup>1</sup> The context was a meeting at a seminar sponsored by the women's section of the Council for the Laity in October 2013. See *National Catholic Reporter*, November 14, 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 144.

Sacred Scriptures?<sup>3</sup> Four female doctors of the Church: St. Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), St. Therese of Liseaux (1873-1897) and St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380) provide insights.

St. Paul admonished that "The Manifestation of the Spirit is given to each of us for the profit of all" (1 Cor. 12:7).<sup>4</sup> What are the strengths, weaknesses, and temptations of our spiritual mothers who gave evidence about their own action plans? How did their action plans relate to divine action plans? Are they specific to a theology of women or shared by women and men? Can these insights help us to go forward to serve the Lord through our own action plans in the Church?

## Part I: Women Leaders and the Law

We start with Eve, the mother of all the living, who summarized the divine command in *Genesis* 3:2 "You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden..."<sup>5</sup> She knew the law, and yet was so taken by the beauty of this tree in the center of the Garden of Eden that she wanted to consume from it for herself. She was willing to believe the lie of another that it was not against God's command to consume from the tree. "So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she gave some to her husband, and he

<sup>3</sup> See St. Gregory the Great, "Indeed the Old Testament is divided into the Law and the Prophets, and truly the New into the Gospels and the Acts and the Sayings of the Apostles." *Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel* (Etna, California: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), Book I, Sixth Homily par 12, p. 102.

<sup>4</sup> All Scriptural references are taken from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (Oxford: University Press, 2004) unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>5</sup> *The Didache Bible* with commentaries based on the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015). Italics my emphasis.

ate.” (Gen: 3:3) By analogy we could ask: Even if my action plan appears good, is it in conformity with the law of God in every respect? Even if it leads to more knowledge, will this knowledge increase or decrease fidelity to God and the Church?

The last part of the passage from *Genesis* 3:6 is instructive, specifically drawing out a consequence for women. Eve did not want to keep this desired fruit of wisdom to herself alone; she wanted to share it. She first took the forbidden fruit for herself, then she gave some of the fruit to her husband, and he ate. Saint John Paul II claimed that the effects of original sin have led women to have a propensity towards the specific temptation to desire to possess the man. Specifically, “To the woman he said: “...your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” (Gen. 3:16) <sup>6</sup> The man’s particular effect of original sin is to want to dominate the woman. Applying these insights from Scripture, a woman could ask herself whether she desires to possess or cling to her action plan for herself and those closest to her rather than freely share it with others?

**Rachel**, the wife of Jacob participated in an important part of the LORD’s covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob when she became the mother of Joseph and of Benjamin. We read in *Genesis* 31:17: “So Jacob arose, and set his sons and his wives on camels... and Rachel stole her father’s household gods...” Rachel may have broken the Divine Law prohibiting the worship of idols when she stole and hid the idols of her father Laban under her saddle as Jacob took his family away into the desert. She may have just stolen something from her father to make up for Jacob’s sacrifice of many years unpaid work. Either way, she broke the commandment against

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<sup>6</sup> See John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*. translation, introduction and index by Michael M. Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006) and Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, “*Mulieris Dignitatem* 20: Twenty Years Later: An Overview of the Document and Challenges,” *Ave Maria Law Review* Vol 8, no 1 (Fall 2009): 13-47.

worshipping idols or stealing. When Laban came after them, without knowing where the idols were, Jacob swore that the person who had them would not live. Rachel hid them by remaining seated on the camel protesting that "the way of woman is upon me." (Gen 31:35). Even though the idols were not found, Rachel's subsequent death in giving birth to Benjamin may be connected with this curse of Jacob against stealing the household gods of Laban.<sup>7</sup>

A woman's hard labor to bring forth a new child provides a perspective to all our action plans. The Lord's action plan may bring our own action plans to a sudden halt as in the case of Rachel. She was buried on the way to Bethlehem, which in God's plan became the city of David. Her tomb is a pilgrimage site for women who want to conceive and give birth.

Later in Scripture the Divine law was explicitly stated in the Ten Commandments. The followers of the covenant should not worship other gods than the one LORD the "I am who I am", whose name was revealed to Moses in the burning bush. (Exodus 3:13) In the books of Exodus 20:1-17 and Deuteronomy 5:4-21, the eternal law of God is specified in the ten commandments. They provide a GPS for the Divine Action Plan.

In relation to this early map, the example of Ruth, the Moabite woman is instructive. As a widow, it was expected that she would return home to her own people. Instead, Ruth's action plan was filled with determination to accompany her mother-in-law and adopt the law and ways of the Jewish covenant with the God who is. Ruth demonstrates fidelity, hard work, and ingenuity, and her action plan becomes an important part of God's plan for His covenant.

<sup>7</sup> "Then they journeyed from Bethel; and when they were still some distance from Ephrath, Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor. And when she was in her hard labor, the midwife said to her, "Fear not, for now you will have another son. And as her soul was departing (for she died) she called his name Ben-o-ni; but his father called his name Benjamin. So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar upon her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel's tomb, which is there to this day." (Genesis 35: 16-20)



*And she [Naomi] said 'See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law. "But Ruth said 'Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my god; where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if even death parts me from you. And when Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more. So the two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem. (The Book of Ruth 1:15-19)*

Ruth worked hard in the fields to support her mother in law. Then she followed Naomi's directions faithfully, married Boaz, and gave birth to Obed, the father of Jesse, and grandfather of King David. Ruth's willingness to execute first the action plan of Naomi and second that of Boaz made it possible for her participate in an important way to further the Divine action plan preparing the genealogy for Jesus Christ, the son of David through Joseph.

Sometimes a Divine action plan situated within eternal law comes into conflict with positive law, i.e., law made by human beings, which today we call 'civil law'. An example of this kind of conflict can be found in the book of Esther. Her uncle Mordecai asked Queen Esther to intervene with her husband the King to plead for the safety of the Jewish people who were threatened with extinction by Haman. Queen Esther did not want to risk her life by going to the King uninvited. Mordecai confronted her with reasons to reconsider.

*Then Mordecai told them to return answer to Esther. "Think not that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter; but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this!" (Esther 4:13-17)*

After Queen Esther decided to break the law made by the King, she asked all the Jews to pray and fast (seeking God's blessing on her action plan). The following portion of the prayer of Esther reveals the proper hierarchical understanding of Law (Eternal Law over civil law) and her ardent plea to God for help in accomplishing her dangerous intervention:

... Put eloquent speech in my mouth before the lion, and turn his heart to hate the man who is fighting against us, so that there may be an end of him and those who agree with him. But save us by thy hand, and help me who am alone and have no helper but thee, O Lord." (Esther 14:3-4, 13-14)

Esther's action plan put everything in the hands of God, and trusted that He would provide the necessary ways to accomplish His goal.

To complete this first section on Women and Law in the Old Testament, I turn to Pope Emeritus Benedict's Apostolic Letter *Lux sui populi suaeque aetatis* [A light for her people and her time] naming **St. Hildegard of Bingen** a Doctor of the Church. He describes how Scripture provides the foundations for St. Hildegard's many contributions.<sup>8</sup> "Her investigation develops from the biblical page in which, in successive phases, it remains firmly anchored." (#4) In addition to her scriptural foundations, Saint Hildegard also worked extensively in other areas of study and service. According to Pope Emeritus Benedict, "Her artistic and scientific works focus mainly on music ... on medicine... and on natural sciences." (4) Benedict continues: "Hildegard asks herself and us the fundamental question, whether it is possible to know God: This is theology's principle task. Her answer is completely positive: through faith, as through a door, the human person is able to approach this knowledge." (4) I can add here my own gratitude to St. Hildegard for her extraordinary work on the integral complementarity of woman and man drawing upon many levels of medieval medicine and science, philosophy, anthropology, and theology.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter naming St. Hildegard of Bingen a Doctor of the Church, *Lux sui populi suaeque aetatis* [A light for her people and her time] October 7, 2012, Copyright 2012 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

<sup>9</sup> See also, Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, *The Concept of Woman: The Aristotelian Revolution (750 B.C. - 1250 A.D.)*, Volume One, Second Edition with new preface and updated bibliography, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1997); and "Sex and Gender Differentiation in Hildegard of

Benedict XVI's Apostolic Letter concludes:

...[T]he attribution of the title of Doctor of the Universal Church to Hildegard of Bingen has great significance for today's world and an extraordinary importance for women. In Hildegard are expressed the most noble values of womanhood: hence the presence of women in the Church and in society is also illumined by her presence, both from the perspective scientific research and that of pastoral activity. Her ability to speak to those who were far from the faith and from the Church make Hildegard a credible witness of the new evangelization." (7)

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## Part II: Women Leaders and Prophecy

Scripture describes situations in which a person with the proper authority did not follow appropriate steps for moving the divine action plan forward. In these situations, God often sent a prophet to lead the people back onto the line of the divine plan. Cardinal Ratzinger described:

First of all, let's dwell for a moment on prophecy in the Old Testament... The essential element of the prophet is not the prediction of future event; the prophet is someone who tells the truth on the strength of his contact with God; the truth for today which also sheds light on the future. It is not a question of foretelling the future in detail, but of rendering the truth of God present at this moment in time and of pointing us in the right direction.<sup>10</sup>

In the above discussion of Esther and the Law, Mordecai pointed out to her that if she did not act to intervene to save the Jewish people from extinction, then God would send help from another direction. The Divine Plan will be fulfilled despite the infidelity of a particular person.

Let us turn now to the example of the often maligned Rebekah. Commentator after commentator, including the feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, have condemned Rebekah for maliciously manipulating her youngest son Jacob to rob her oldest son Esau from his rightful

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Bingen and Edith Stein," *Communio: International Catholic Review*, Vol. XX, no. 2, (Summer, 1993), pp. 389-414.

<sup>10</sup> See Niels Christian Hvidt, "The Problem of Christian Prophecy: Interview with Cardinal Josef Ratzinger.: Available from: <http://www.tlig.org/en/spirituality/prophecy/intratzl/> Accessed August 15, 2015. Bold my emphasis.

inheritance from his father Isaac.<sup>11</sup> Yet something deeper is actually occurring in the Scriptural account than mere maternal manipulation for selfish purposes. Isaac was not only blind physically, but also blind to the divine plan. Isaac was about to give his blessing to Esau, who had traded his birthright for a bowl of porridge and had taken wives who worshipped idols. When Jacob was fearful about pretending to be Esau and the danger of being cursed rather than blessed by his father Isaac, Rebekah said: “Upon me be your curse, my son; only obey my word, and go, and fetch them to me.” (Genesis 27: 11-13) This is the earliest example in Scripture of a woman [or a man] offering to take on to herself the possible negative consequences of an act in order to free the other person to follow the divine plan.

St. John Chrysostom (347-407), in his 53<sup>rd</sup> homily on Genesis said the following:

Behold the great love of the mother, or rather the management of God. For it was he himself who gave to her this stratagem, and took care that all things should turn out well. . . . What, therefore, of Rebekah . . . for she acted not only according to her own intention, but she serves the divine oracle and sought with all eagerness to free the boy from fears and strengthen his soul that he might accomplish the stratagem; nor did she promise him that he could mislead the father and hide it. But what of this “Upon me be your curse, my son, only obey my word, and go get them for me.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See Christine Allen, “Who Was Rebekah?,” *Beyond Androcentrism: New Essays on Women and Religion*, Rita Gross, ed., (Montana: Scholars Press, 1977), 183-216; “Who was Rebekah?,” revised as “On Me Be the Curse, My Son”, Chapter 10 in *Encounter with the Text, Issues in Hermeneutics with special attention to Genesis 25-35*, ed. Martin Buss, Montana: Scholar's Press, Semaia, (1979), 159-172. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in *The Woman's Bible* shared a Protestant theology, based on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, that deception is wrong in any circumstance. She decries “the supreme wickedness of Rebekah in deceiving Isaac, defrauding Esau, and undermining the moral sense of the son she loved,” and adds further “It is a pitiful tale of greed and deception. Alas! Where can a child look for lessons in truth, honor, and generosity, when the mother they naturally trust, sets at defiance every principle of justice and mercy to secure some worldly advantage.”

<sup>12</sup> Saint Johanus Chrisostomos, Patriarch of Constantinople. *Collectio Selecta Ecclesiae Patrum LXXI*. Paris: Parent-Debarres, 1834, pp. 195-96. See also St. Gregory the Great (540-604) *Homilies on the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel*, trans. Theodosia Tomkinsonans. (Etna, California: Center for Traditionalist Orthodox Studies, 2008), Book One Sixth Homily, pp. 95-96.



Rebekah's courage stands out in the divinely inspired action plan to secure Jacob's place in the genealogy of David and Jesus Christ. Rebekah learned of her part this divine plan when she consulted the LORD while pregnant with Esau and Jacob, namely that the older would serve the younger. She was willing to take on herself the possible curse of Isaac, to support the divine plan.

The next example follows the historical moment when the Jewish people crossed through the red sea on dry ground. Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron, was described as "the prophetess ... [who] took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and dancing. And Miriam sang to them: 'Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.'" (*Exodus* 15:20-21).

Despite this great moment of Miriam's leadership, she defected before long, when Moses was on the mountain receiving the tablets of the Divine commandments. Miriam joined the others who gave up their jewelry to be melted and turned to worship the golden calf (*Exodus* 32:3-4) Even though at one moment in time, the line of an action plan seems to be so good, at another moment a person may begin to have doubts and even turn away from God when it seems to be taking too long for His plan to be set into motion. /

A further example is found in Deborah, "a prophetess,... [who according to the book of *Judges* 4:4] was officially judging the people of Israel" at the time that the people of Israel cried to the LORD for help after being oppressed for twenty years by the king of Canaan and the commander of his army Sisera. Deborah, "sent and summoned Barak... and said to him 'The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, "Go, gather your men at Mount Tabor taking ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. And I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the river Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I

will give him into your hand.” [Jdgs 4: 1-8] Here the divine action plan contained not only its goal, but also some of the steps to achieve its goal.

The commander Barak held back, asking Deborah to go with him. She answered, “I will surely go with you; nevertheless, the road on which you are going will not lead to your glory, for the LORD will sell Sisera into the hand of a woman. The cowardess of Barak was revealed when Deborah carefully integrated her action plan into the divine action plan until all was accomplished.

Our final example in this section is the widow Judith, who developed an action plan after the leaders of the Israelites had put God to the test when they were completely surrounded by their enemies. Judith had established a life style of constant availability to God. After Uzziah, the leader of the people tested God by saying that he would surrender the city to their enemies unless God came to their aid with water within five days, Judith called the rulers together and publically challenged them:

*Who are you, that have put God to the test this day, and are setting yourselves up in the place of God among the sons of men? You are putting the Lord Almighty to the test— But you will never know anything! ... For if he does not choose to help us within these five days, he has power to protect us within any time he pleases, or even to destroy us in the presence of our enemies. Do not try to bind the purposes of the Lord our God;... (Jud 8:12-13, 15-17)*

Judith then summarized the history of the Jewish people and their relation with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. She reminded them that the LORD should be their only God. Yet they continued to abide by their threat to God.

Judith switched from making an argument to trust in God to formulating the beginning of an action plan to save the people herself. She did not describe the details of the plan, which perhaps she did not yet know, but she set the plan in motion and waited for God to reveal how it would be worked out step by step.

*Judith said to them, "Listen to me, I am about to do a thing which will go down through all generations of our descendants. Stand at the city gate tonight, and I will go out with my maid; and within the days after which you have promised to surrender the city to our enemies, the Lord will deliver Israel by my hand. Only, do not try to find out what I plan; for I will not tell you until I have finished what I am about to do. (Jud 8:32-34)*

Judith begins to carry out her plan by fasting, wearing sackcloth, and offering prayers of petition (Jud 9:9). She intercedes for her people with a prayer of praise: "And cause thy whole nation and every tribe to know and understand that thou art God, the God of all power and might, and that there is no other who protects the people of Israel but thou alone!" (Jud 9:14)

Judith next transformed her appearance, and she went with her maid out of the city gates to put her plan into further steps of action. The rest of the story is well known. Judith makes her way into the camp of Holofernes, whom she wins over with her beauty and the false impression that she will be able to lead his army by particular paths to conquer his enemies. When it becomes clear to Judith how to complete this phase of her action plan she prays: "Give me strength this day, O Lord God of Israel! And she stuck his neck twice with all her might [with Holofernes' own sword] and severed his head from his body." (Jud 13:7-8)

Judith and her maid then followed their usual routine of going outside the camp for prayer, but continued to their home. After presenting the head of Holofernes to their people, Judith directed the military operations until all their enemies were overcome. Together they praised the God of Israel. (Jud 14-16).

To complete this section on women and prophets, we turn now to **St. Teresa of Jesus** who on September 27, 1970 was proclaimed the first woman Doctor of the Church by Pope Paul VI in his text *Multiformis Sapientia Dei* [*The manifold wisdom of God*] The Carmelite Order had lost its original zeal for God, Christian prayer, and contemplative religious life. St. Teresa of Avila followed in the footsteps of the women prophets in the Old Testament, who helped bring

people back on line with the divine action plan at the same time as she effected much needed reforms in religious life. Pope Paul VI described her contribution: "...[A]lmost always suffering in body and full of tribulations [St Teresa] faced fearless[ly] any company for the glory of God and for the good of the Church of Christ/... We do not doubt having to proclaim [her] doctor of the Church, [the] first among women, especially for her knowledge and doctrine of divine things."<sup>13</sup>

St. Teresa became a master interpreter of spiritual discernment and authentic spiritual life. Pope Paul VI elaborated on her significance for the development of theology:

...[S]he was able to understand, to teach and to write, by inspiration of God, on very deep subjects, considering Christ the only source of her doctrine and almost a living book. Regarding this we must consider one thing above all wonderful, that St. Teresa has penetrated into the mystery of Christ and in the knowledge of the human soul with so much acuteness and sagacity, that her doctrine clearly indicates the certain presence and strength of a singular charism of the [Holy] Spirit.(8)

Her teaching was important not only for the life of the faithful, but also, and most importantly in working order, for that section of choice and great value of theological knowledge, which is now called spiritual theology.(10)

St. Teresa of Avila's Jewish heritage and Christian formation serve to bridge the theology of woman in the Old Testament with examples of women identified in the New Testament.

### Part III: Women Leaders and the Encounter with Jesus Christ

When we come to women in the New Testament, everything begins with Mary of Nazareth. Her encounter with Jesus Christ came after she received a message from the angel Gabriel who was sent to her by God, the Father. This first encounter is a paradigm for

<sup>13</sup> Pope Paul VI *Multiformis Sapientia Dei [The manifold wisdom of God]*, on September 27, 1970, Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana, #3.



discovering how God's action plan can transform one's own action plan. "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus." (Lk 1:30). Mary enters into what Saint John Paul II calls 'the Annunciation dialogue' using her personal intelligence and with free will asking: "How shall this be since I have no husband?" (Lk 1:34). "The Holy Spirit shall come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." (Lk 1:35) Then Mary makes an act of will to receive this extraordinary gift from God: "... let it be to me according to your word." (Lk 1:38)

Saint John Paul II elaborates on this moment in a way which brings out a key element in the theology of woman:

Thus the "fullness of time" manifests the extraordinary dignity of the "woman." On the one hand, this dignity consists in the supernatural elevation to union with God in Jesus Christ, which determines the ultimate finality of the existence of every person both on earth and in eternity. From this point of view, the "woman" is the representative and the archetype of the whole human race; she represents the humanity which belongs to all human beings, both men and women. On the other hand, however, the event at Nazareth highlights a form of union with the living God which can only belong to the "woman," Mary: the union between mother and son. The virgin of Nazareth truly becomes the Mother of God.<sup>14</sup>

The beginning of his Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* contains a principle: "The Mother of the Redeemer has a precise place in the plan of salvation..."<sup>15</sup> Each one of us also has a precise place in the plan of salvation. Saint Edith Stein (St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) expressed this truth in her work *Finite and Eternal Being*, when she described how each of us "steps into

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *On the Dignity & Vocation of Women* (Boston: St Paul Books and Media, 1988), #4. Italics his emphasis.

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Mater* On the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1987), #1.

existence” with a pure form in God of His divine plan for our life.<sup>16</sup> Yet the divine plan is not imposed on us without the cooperation of our free will. We are challenged throughout life to make our own plans commensurate with the plan of God. We learn how to do this through prayer, thinking about our goals, and listening to suggestions by wise and holy men and women.

Pondering the life of Mary of Nazareth leads us to many surprises. She had willingly to adjust her specific plans to accord with the divine plan for herself and for Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Consider her travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem when nine months pregnant (Lk 2:1-7), her flight into Egypt when so many innocent children were murdered because of her son (Mt 2:13-15), her unexpected life as a refugee in a foreign country when Herod was looking to kill her son (Mt 2:19-23), her three day search for Jesus in Jerusalem when he was lost from their caravan (Lk 2: 41-51), her initiative with Jesus in Cana when he did not think that the time for his public signs had yet come (Jn 2:1-11), her presence at the foot of the Cross as her son was dying (Jn 25-27), and her central place with the apostles in prayers in the upper room with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 1:14-2:4)<sup>17</sup>. These examples are spiritually rich for anyone with an action plan to ponder as she seeks to remain in relation with the living God as events unfold unexpectedly. Each one of us needs to recognize that “His [The Holy Spirit’s] life-giving action”<sup>18</sup> transforms our own plans in ways that continue to build up Church.

<sup>16</sup> Edith Stein, “[T]he being human of this particular human being is actual and actuating in this person. This person shares it with no other human being. It is not, prior to the person’s own being, but steps into existence together with the person. It determines *what* this particular human being is at any particular time, and this changing what expresses a more or less extensive approximation to the end, i.e., to the *pure form*.”, Edith Stein/Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross Discalced Carmelite, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent To the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 226.

<sup>17</sup> See also *Lumen Gentium* #59 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 726.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus*, On the Right Ordering and Development of Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1974), #27.

**Mary, the Mother of God** recapitulates the gifts of the law and prophets who anticipated her specific place in salvation history. After her Assumption into heaven, Mary continues her work of guidance in Guadalupe, La Salette, Lourdes, and Fatima.<sup>19</sup> A theology of woman needs to understand the Blessed Virgin Mary's vocation as a concentrated point of spiritual light especially for each woman.

When other women in the Gospel encountered Jesus Christ, they were completely transformed. Saint John Paul II describes this phenomenon as follows:

...[T]he women who are close to Christ discover themselves in the truth which he "teaches" and "does" even when this truth concerns their "sinfulness." They feel "liberated" by this truth, restored to themselves; they feel loved with "eternal love," with a love which finds direct expression in Christ himself. In Christ's sphere of action their position is transformed.<sup>20</sup>

Consider the Samaritan woman, who had five husbands, in conversation with Jesus at the well (Jn 4: 7-42). The woman speaks truthfully to him when she says: "I know that the Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes he will show us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he." (Jn 4: 25-26) To Martha, the sister of Lazarus, Jesus revealed His future Resurrection and its gift to all who believe: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world." (Jn 11: 25-27)

<sup>19</sup> See Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, "Mary and the Vocation of Philosophers," in John Hittinger, ed. *The Vocation of Philosophers: From Maritain to John Paul II* (Washington DC: American Maritain Association- Distributed by the Catholic University of America Press, 2011): 51-76; and Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM, *The Concept of Woman: Search for Communion of Persons, Volume III (1500-2015)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), Chapter One; and Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 74-75.

<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, *On the Dignity & Vocation of Women*, #15. His emphasis

After Jesus' death and Resurrection, he encountered Mary Magdalene, who had stood with Mary at the foot of the Cross during the crucifixion. Jesus spoke, making her the first witness to his Resurrection <sup>giving her a mission to testify to</sup> and to the divine plan of the Ascension: "...[G]o to my brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went and said to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord,' and she told them that he had said these things to her." (Jn 20:17-18)

Here we discover women who had their own plans in mind, who were seeking something more, being transformed by Jesus Christ and His divine plan. They were also ready to receive and to transmit a new plan to others. This gives us an important perspective for evaluating our own relation to God's plans. In each situation the woman took the initiative to go to a particular place: to draw some water, to admonish Jesus for not coming before her brother's death, or to find the Body of Jesus. Each was drawn to a greater truth or revelation of our Lord.<sup>21</sup>

On October 19, 1997 St. Therese of Liseaux, was named Doctor of the Church by Pope John Paul II in the Apostolic Letter *Divini Amoris Scientia* [Nations shall come to your light.] When a woman is transformed by Christ, her witness expresses a unique holiness for the good of the Church. Pope John Paul II emphasizes the personal encounters with Christ revealed in St. Therese's writings: "...in her experience is the centre and fullness of Revelation. Therese knew Jesus, loved him and made him loved with the passion of a bride. She penetrated the mysteries of his infancy, the words of his Gospel, the passion of the suffering Servant engraved on his holy Face, in the splendour of his glorious life, in his Eucharistic presence." (8)<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 72-73.

<sup>22</sup> See also Ratzinger's discussion of Therese "of the Holy Face" "...for in this world the face of Christ is a 'bleeding Head, so wounded': precisely in this way it manifests the mystery of God's love and the true face of God.", *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 28.



St. Therese's writings emphasize the Scriptures: "Her writings contain over 1,000 biblical quotations: more than 400 from the Old Testament and over 600 from the New." (9) Her vocation, with its desire to share the truth about Jesus Christ, has radiated throughout the world.

Pope John Paul II summarized her gift to the Church:

Thus we can rightly recognize in the Saint of Lisieux the charism of a Doctor of the Church because of the gift of the Holy Spirit she received for living and expressing her experience of faith and because of her particular understanding of the mystery of Christ. (7)

30 min

#### Part IV: Women Leaders go forth in Apostolic Service

Following the Ascension of Jesus, the apostles were staying in the upper room in Jerusalem: "All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, *together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus*, and with his brethren." (Acts 1:14) Thus, according to Luke-Acts women prayed together with the men in the first community in Jerusalem.

After Judas was replaced by Matthias to complete the twelve apostles, the Holy Spirit was poured forth into the growing community of women and men:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly a sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4)

The Holy Spirit "resting on each one of them" will now accompany the works of women who together with the men build up the Church. This period marks the model of collaboration among men who are Apostles and women who are disciples which began during Jesus's life-time.

After Paul and Barnabas became Christians, one of the women who met them in Philippi was called "Lydia, ... a seller of purple goods. She was "a worshiper of God... was baptized,

with her household.” Then Lydia said to them: ‘If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.’ The author of Acts follows with the words: “And she prevailed upon us.” (Acts 16:14-15). With Lydia we encounter a generous and persuasive Christian professional woman in the commercial world.<sup>23</sup>

In Athens at the Areopagus, (Acts 17:16-33) Paul engaged Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and religious intellectuals, trying to persuade them that God was not made of silver or gold, but rather gave “life and breath” and “made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth”. Paul announced the call to repentance, and a coming judgment by a judge whom God had raised from the dead. Although most of his listeners turned away at this message, some “joined him and believed, among them... a woman named Damaris...” (Acts 17:34).

Another woman named **Priscilla** associated with her husband **Aquila** in the profession of tent making. They had been expelled from Italy by Claudius who commanded all the Jews leave Rome. Paul “went to see them [in Corinth], and because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them; they worked [together], for by trade they were tentmakers.” (Acts 18:1-4) Paul referred to them again in Romans 16:3-4, “**Greet Prisca and Aquila,** my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the Church in their house.” In this same letter Paul also refers to “**our sister Phoebe, a deaconess** of the Church at Cenchreae, that you may receive her in the Lord as befits the saints; and help her in whatever she may require from you, for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well.” (Rom 16:1)

<sup>23</sup> “There, in Philippi, he [Paul] baptized the household of Lydia, a traveling merchant visiting from Thyatira who would play a key role in building up the Christian community in Thyatira,” *The Didache Bible*, Note Acts 16:4-15, p. 1486.

As you turn more directly toward your own professional work and action plans, it is good to keep in mind that you spiritually descend from Christian women, who from the beginning worked directly in complement with the Apostles and male disciples. While Scripture does not give us any concrete descriptions of the kinds of work these women gave to the Church, it is clear from St. Paul's writings that they were very zealous and generous in their work, opening their homes to others, even to risking their lives to bring others to the truth of the Christian Faith.

Our final example comes from the twelfth book of Revelations which provides the spiritual context for all the theology of woman. The Evangelist John describes the monumental battle between the evil dragon and the woman who gives birth.

A great sign appeared in heaven, a woman...; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery. And another sign appeared in heaven; behold, a great red dragon... [who] stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, that he might devour her child when she brought it forth... (Rev 12:1, 4)

**Saint John Paul II** reflects on this passage in Section 30 of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, entitled

**"Awareness of a Mission."** His words are prophetically important as you go forth to implement your own action plans: "... we see that the struggle with evil and the Evil One marks the biblical exemplar of the 'woman' from the beginning to the end of history... Is not the Bible trying to tell us that it is precisely in the 'woman'— Eve-Mary— that history witnesses a dramatic struggle for every human being, the struggle for his or her fundamental 'yes' or 'no' to God and God's eternal plan for humanity?"<sup>24</sup> In this context Saint John Paul II identifies important starting points for the theology of woman:

The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way. Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way— precisely by reason of their femininity— and this in a particular way determines their vocation.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, #30.

The moral force of women, which draws strength from this awareness and this entrusting, expresses itself in a great number of figures of the Old Testament, of the time of Christ, and of later ages right up to our own day. (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 30)

Our fourth woman Doctor of the Church St. Catherine of Siena provides a wonderful model for women of today especially with respect to her active apostolate in the midst of the world and the Church. In his 1970 Apostolic Letter *Mirabilis in Ecclesia Deus* [*The Lord is Wonderful in His Church*] Pope Paul VI described St. Catherine of Siena: “Growing daily in virtue, summoned and drawn by a vision of God, in the year 1370 Catherine entered upon a ministry which is truly and properly called an apostolate [even though]... at that time no such ministry was open to women...”<sup>25</sup> (2) St. Catherine, a member of the 3<sup>rd</sup> order of lay Dominicans, is well-known for convincing Pope Gregory XI to return the papacy to Rome after it had moved to Avignon, France. She also resolved conflicts between different political factions in Italy and courageously cared for the sick.

Pope Paul VI summarized the gifts which St. Catherine liberally shared with her followers:

There were in that group men and women of every place and social status: religious and prelates, teachers and theologians. Not only Catherine’s personality (human as it was) and the fame of her miracles drew these to her, but also, and that more powerfully, the light of her supernaturally inspired spirit, genius, and counsel.

Since her brilliant light gradually shown more and more brightly and radiated far beyond her own city and region, and since her counsels were sought more and more, her

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<sup>25</sup> Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Letter *Mirabilis in Ecclesia Deus* [*The Lord is Wonderful in His Church*.] In an official summary of this document we read: that as early as 1967 Pope Paul proposed to the appropriate Congregation that Saint Catherine of Siena be considered to be named a Doctor of the Church; and in January 1969 after hearing the carefully prepared *relatio* came to the conclusion “Saint Catherine of Siena is worthy to be enrolled in the list of the Doctors of the Church.” (5)



very numerous letters were sent to all sorts of persons. By a certain natural ability, she dictated several letters at the same time to her secretaries.

These letters display the ardor and desire of her spirit burning with love. They demonstrate her pure faith and the solidity of her principles, her gravity of speech, the prudence of her judgments and the subtlety of her opinions in theological matters. (3)

## Conclusion

What have we learned about the Theology of Woman from this very brief consideration of women in four areas of Scripture focusing on law, prophets, encounter with Jesus Christ, and apostolic mission coordinated with the four female Doctors of the Church?

First, we need always to have our prime focus on the divine plan rather than on our own action plan and to not make an idol out of our action plan.

Second, as women we have temptations to face that original sin makes us more disposed than men to fall into.

Third, as women we have some wonderful models in Scripture who remain always faithful to the divine plan, integrating their own plans into the divine plan for the good of others, and collaborating with ordained and laymen in the Church to bring about the completion of this plan.

Fourth, as human beings we realize that temptations are a normal part of Christian life of women and of men. Jesus experienced them and demonstrated how to overcome them. Cardinal Ratzinger offered a beautiful summary of this fact:

Thus the temptation story summarizes the entire struggle of Jesus; it is about the nature of his mission, but at the same time it is also, in general, about the right ordering of human life, about the way to be human, about the way of history. Finally, it is about

what is really important... This ultimate thing, this decisive thing, is the primacy of God. The germ of all temptation is setting God aside, so that he seems to be a secondary concern when compared with all the urgent priorities of our lives. To consider ourselves, the needs and desires of the moment to be more important than he is—that is the temptation that always besets us. For in doing so we deny God his divinity, and we make ourselves, or rather, the powers that threaten us, into our god.<sup>26</sup>

To conclude, the women in the Old and New Testaments and the female Doctors of the Church tried to avoid putting God to the test, to persevere when things seem to take much time, to remain faithful to the divine commandments, to be willing to go forward prophetically when others seem to turn away from the divine plan, and to love Jesus Christ and to rejoice in the Holy Spirit as He leads us through dying and rising in Christ to live integrally our own place in the divine action plan for the salvation of the world.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ratzinger, *On the Way to Jesus Christ*, 86-87.

<sup>27</sup> I am very grateful to Sr. Mary Judith O'Brien, RSM, JD, JCD and Mother Mary Timothea Elliott, RSM, SSD for their suggestions for revision to this presentation.